

*Irish University Review Essay****Tales of the Time: Early Fictions of the 1798 Rebellion***

In its capacity to generate drastically different interpretations, inspire historical and political controversy, and to drive reasonable people into drastically opposing camps, the 1798 Rebellion could well be a synecdoche for Irish history itself. It is, in many ways, the archetypal Irish historical moment. From its immediate aftermath right up to the present day, the 1798 Rebellion has been a persistent (and persistently controversial) topic, and how one interprets 1798 tends to reflect one's general view of Irish history and politics. However, '1798' in its totality is more than just the historical What, How and Why debated by historians. In its widest sense – the sense in which it is remembered or recognized by the general public – it includes the folklore, balladry and literature that the Rebellion inspired. When Seamus Heaney uses the phrase, 'broken wave', in his poem, 'Requiem for the Croppies', or when book titles such as *The Heather Blazing* and *The Mighty Wave* appear,<sup>1</sup> the intertextual nature of 1798 remembrance is the context, as these are well-known and evocative images and phrases borrowed from P.J. McCall's ballad 'Boolavogue', probably the most famous 1798 ballad of them all. The fact that this ballad was not written until a century after the Rebellion in no way reduces the immediacy, the significance, or the effect of this borrowing in the public mind. It merely adds another accretive level to 1798 memory, just as 'Boolavogue' in turn is based on an older ballad that appeared shortly after the Rebellion.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, such is the power of the 'balladization' of 1798 that it almost requires a deliberate act of will by a writer to resist using some variant of another memorable phrase from a ballad written decades after the

event, John Kells Ingram's famous line, 'Who fears to speak of Ninety-Eight?', in a book, paper or article title.<sup>3</sup> However frustrating it might be for historians who wish to engage with what they perceive to be the truth or the authentic documentary evidence, we must recognise that 1798 is more than an historical event – it is, to use Pierre Nora's idea, a 'site' or 'realm' of memory (a '*lieu de mémoire*'),<sup>4</sup> and sites of memory have an independent life of their own. At its most simplistic, the history of 1798 itself has a history, and fictional versions of 1798 are just as much part of the communal memory of 1798 as any objective, historically verifiable, 'truth'. All narrative history contains elements of the imaginative, and history is continually rewritten in the context of an ever-changing present. The line between history and fiction is not as clear-cut as historians might wish, and where there is disagreement, prejudice and controversy, partizan histories may be no more truthful than historical fictions. Indeed, since fictions are by their very nature fictional, they at least proclaim their fictionality from the outset.

Up to quite recently, Ina Ferris' observation that the 1798 Rebellion did not become a persistent topic in fiction until the 1820s<sup>5</sup> would have been largely unquestioned. However, recent bibliographical research has revealed that just as 'histories' of the Rebellion appeared practically instantaneously in the wake of the event, fictional versions also began to be produced almost immediately. In fact, from 1799 onwards the need to engage with the Rebellion in some way or other helped to accelerate the evolution of Irish and Irish-related fiction. In the first two decades after 1798 at least eleven novels were published that engaged substantially with the Rebellion,<sup>6</sup> and the significance of 1798 can be seen in the fact that the first two known Irish-American novels, *The Irish Emigrant* (1817) and James McHenry's *The Insurgent Chief* (1824),

both take the Rebellion in Ulster as their subject matter. The perceived emergence of 1798 as a fictional subject only in the 1820s can be largely explained by the success of Sir Walter Scott's historical novels, and the possibility that his historical novel model could be a useful vehicle for exploring the Rebellion's historical causes and effects.<sup>7</sup> Scott's success undoubtedly encouraged a body of Irish writers ranging from the moderately well-known to the familiar (names such as John Gamble, Alicia Le Fanu, James McHenry, William Hamilton Maxwell, Michael Banim and Eyre Evans Crowe) to engage with the Rebellion in the 1820s. All told, the bibliographical evidence suggests that 1798 as a topic was as popular in the nineteenth century with writers of fiction as it was with historians – perhaps even more so.<sup>8</sup>

Ferris' observation, however, is fair and reasonable if one confines one's reading to the major Irish writers of the period in question – Maria Edgeworth, Sydney Owenson (later Lady Morgan), Charles Robert Maturin, John and Michael Banim and Thomas Moore. While the Rebellion features briefly in Maria Edgeworth's *Ennui* (1808), it is not till Michael Banim's *The Croppy* (1828) that another of that elite group of novelists addresses the Rebellion directly. Before this, one has to make do with what Tom Dunne has called the 'secret sigh' in the obliqueness, the paratextual spaces, and the silences in their writing.<sup>9</sup> Of course, neither Ferris nor Dunne when writing had the benefit of the recent bibliographical work done by the Cardiff Corvey project and the bibliographical treasure-houses of *The English Novel 1770-1829* and *A Guide to Irish Fiction 1650-1900*.<sup>10</sup> This work reveals to us a whole range of previously unknown texts and compels us to re-evaluate previously held assumptions. It is not entirely our fault: the impression of a grand silence in the wake of 1798 was facilitated by the major writers

themselves. As late as 1827, Sydney Owenson confidently proclaimed that the period of the 1790s, the subject of her novel *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, had 'in the present state of exhausted combinations, one great recommendation to the novelist – it is untouched.'<sup>11</sup> One could argue that the 1798 Rebellion remained in largely the same state after Owenson has finished with it, for in a novel centred on the political and social machinations of the 1790s, and in which the United Irishmen feature heavily, Owenson succeeded in avoiding the actual Rebellion entirely. But whereas those we perceive as major writers in this period may have treated the Rebellion with caution, others did not, and the aim of this article is to convey some sense of the range of fictional material produced in the two decades following the Rebellion, and argue that far from being an absence, the 1798 Rebellion was in fact a persistent, troubling imperative for writers anxious to represent Ireland in fiction. In fact, the evidence presented here would suggest that if the 1801 Act of Union created a market for and an interest in Irish-related fiction, it was the 1798 Rebellion that provided the immediate crisis that needed to be addressed in that fiction.

Dunne's secret sigh seems entirely apposite when one recognises that even much of the fiction seemingly written with 1798 in mind actually goes out of its way to avoid the subject. Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800) stresses (albeit somewhat unconvincingly) that it is set in the pre-1782 period,<sup>12</sup> and the action in Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806) is rather improbably – indeed impossibly – shoehorned into a period after the Rebellion and before 1800. Even Lady Caroline Lamb's notorious novel *Glenarvon* (1816) occurs not during the Rebellion proper but, if careful attention is paid to the chronology, the year before. At this novel's climax the

eponymous Glenarvon – widely known to have been based on Lamb’s former lover Lord Byron – dies fighting on the British side at the naval battle of Camperdown, an event which actually occurs in October 1797. The subsequent British victory prevents the Dutch invasion fleet from sailing, and thus the ‘rebel’ Glenarvon actually dies preventing a potentially even more deadly rebellion from occurring, and ensuring to a large degree that the one destined to erupt the following year would not succeed. Ultimately however, *Glenarvon* is not about the 1798 Rebellion. It is not Glenarvon’s role as a rebel leader that marked him out as evil incarnate in the novel, but the fact that his subsequent desertion of both his lovers and the rebels he incited reveals that a tendency to betray is a fundamental element of his nature. This, after all, is the picture of Byron that a spurned lover would want to paint in what is primarily a revenge narrative. The notion of a man being a rebel from genuinely held principles would not necessarily be an unattractive one to a liberal English reader, but a serial seducer and betrayer was perhaps a different matter.

Like *Glenarvon*, Charles Robert Maturin’s *The Milesian Chief* (1812) is also set against the background of a rebellion. Here it is even more explicitly not the 1798 Rebellion, although this point was missed by contemporary reviewers and is still missed by some modern critics.<sup>13</sup> Of course, 1798’s shadow falls across *The Milesian Chief* as surely as it does on more direct fictional accounts, but the whole point of the rebellion featured in *The Milesian Chief* is that it is not 1798 but a post-union insurrection – one inspired by the pride and frustration of a single individual – set against a background of disillusionment with the results of political union. Maturin emphasises that Connal O’Morven’s rebellion is more akin to that of Robert Emmet’s than of 1798, and Connal

himself continually acknowledges that he is traitorously rebelling against his country. The fact that his rebellion is not 1798 is further emphasised when Connal, in the midst of battle, recalls the deaths of Lords O'Neill and Mountjoy, both of whom fell in action in 1798. However perhaps the starkest indication that this is not a re-imagined 1798 is seen when the coach horses bringing Connal's love Armida Fitzalban to the rebel camp are frightened by the sight of a skeleton on a gibbet, a relic of the last rebellion.<sup>14</sup> This skeleton is not just another reminder that this is not 1798, but it also serves the vital purpose of reminding us that it is not that long after 1798. Rebellion in general looms over *The Milesian Chief* from the moment the action in the novel moves from Italy to Ireland. Armida's first sight of the regulation crumbling gothic pile that was to be her new home, and which was once the ancestral seat of the O'Morvens, sends 'A thousand gloomy thoughts of Irish atrocity ... into her mind' (*MC*, i, p.62). Despite 1798's overweening presence, however, the moral of *The Milesian Chief*, mirrored in the frustrated and ultimately doomed romance of Connal and Armida, two lovers from vastly different worlds, has little to do with the United Irishmen or 1798, except that they and it are troublesome spectres from the recent past. The comparative recentness of both feed into the moral of *The Milesian Chief*, which is that the new political union, unless accompanied by some measure of social justice, cannot hope to succeed.

While these two texts can undoubtedly be read as commentaries on 1798, and as utilizers of the atmosphere of shock and horror left in the Rebellion's wake, we must look elsewhere to find fiction that unambiguously engages with the Rebellion itself. And this 'elsewhere' is into the realm of what might be described as the uncanonical, or more specifically, novels that were too reactionary or conservative to endure, or works that in

their own time were perhaps perceived as eccentric. It is perhaps not surprising that the earliest 1798 novels were largely in the anti-Jacobin mode of writing popular in the 1790s and early 1800s. Recent critical research on anti-Jacobin novels, coupled with an acknowledgement that their sheer number – by one count over fifty – and their content may well more accurately reflect the reality of political opinion in England during this period, has given them a new significance for literary historians.<sup>15</sup> For anti-Jacobins, the 1798 Rebellion was proof positive of their worst fears, and it is no surprise that it featured prominently in their writing. Charles Lucas, one of the foremost anti-Jacobin polemicists (and not to be confused with the Irish patriot of the same name) published *The Infernal Quixote* in 1801, in which the unsubtly-monikered James Marauder, an almost supernaturally malevolent product of ‘French’ principles, wreaks havoc on both sides of the Irish Sea, and becomes a leader of the Rebellion in Ireland under an assumed name. The irregular chronology and the vagueness of the Rebellion in *The Infernal Quixote* might lead one to dismiss the novel as merely utilizing the Rebellion as background, but Malcolm Grenby has pointed out that at least one of the key incidents outlined does have a real historical basis, although the event in question occurred some months before the Rebellion proper.<sup>16</sup> An uncharacteristically subtle touch (by anti-Jacobin standards) may be detected in the fact that Marauder’s assumed name in Ireland – McGinnis – is very similar to the alleged surname of the leader of the Ulster Defenders who defected from the rebel army the night before the decisive battle of Ballynahinch.<sup>17</sup> This nominal link with that particular act of double treachery may not have been lost on Lucas’s more informed readers.

Although conservative literature of this time tends not to have remained popular with literary critics and historians of the intervening period, this does not mean that it was not popular and influential with the reading public of its own time. The fact that *The Infernal Quixote* was published by the Minerva Press, the leading publisher of popular gothic novels of the time, suggests that Lucas was not just trying to preach to worried conservatives or reactionaries, but was also looking for a wider audience. In this he appears to succeed. The novel's readers ranged from Sir George Nugent, commander of the crown forces in the north during the Rebellion, to the not quite as conventional Claire Clairmont, step-sister to Mary Shelley and mistress of Byron and Percy Shelley, who read *The Infernal Quixote* as late as 1819.<sup>18</sup>

An attack on the ideology of the 'new philosophy' associated with revolution was a constant feature of anti-Jacobin literature in general, although the attacks did not always follow the same form. In another anti-Jacobin production, Mrs Bullock's *Dorothea; Or, A Ray of the New Light*, published the same year as *The Infernal Quixote*, we again see an attack on the ideas of Godwin and Rousseau, but this time the central troublemaker is a female who, unlike the diabolical Marauder, is largely well-intentioned but tragically misguided. Here again the terrible reality of revolutionary ideas in practice is demonstrated by situating much of the action against the background of the 1798 Rebellion, although again the insurrection described here bears little resemblance to the real Rebellion, being primarily centred in Waterford and Kilkenny. Grenby, however, has drawn attention to the fact that the attack on the gaol in Kilkenny which signals the start of the Rebellion in *Dorothea* can be seen as a kind of Bastille re-enactment,<sup>19</sup> further



supporting the notion that for anti-Jacobin writers 1798 was primarily an analogue for the French Revolution.

The ultimate weakness of the anti-Jacobin novel is seen most clearly in a slightly later work, Robert Bisset's *Modern Literature* (1804). Bisset was another prominent anti-Jacobin polemicist and a mainstay of the conservative periodical the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, and in his novel he included an opportunistic figure named Roger O'Rourke, who becomes a United Irishman as well as a clergyman of at least three different denominations at various times. Ultimately, however, Bisset's scattergun approach to a range of anti-Jacobin *bêtes noires* is subordinated to an attack on the nature of modern literature itself. Utilising a novel to criticise the tastes of novel readers may be an amusing ploy, but it does not win many converts or new readers, as canny publishers knew only too well. The great weakness of the anti-Jacobin novel was that its writers generally had little respect for the novel form or its typical reader. Moreover, for writers such as Lucas, Bullock and Bisset, the 1798 Rebellion was never really about Ireland or 1798; anti-Jacobin writers were first and foremost concerned about the threat to British society from anti-Jacobin ideas and from French military aggression. Their willingness to re-imagine and re-shape the 1798 Rebellion to suit their own didactic needs is proof enough of the secondary nature of the Rebellion in their writings. In contrast, one can argue that for Irish writers writing in the two decades afterwards, the 1798 Rebellion was too enormous and controversial a topic to be trifled with, and that the shrewd writer, mindful of their own literary reputation and having perhaps some personal experience of the trauma and political fallout generated, might be reluctant to engage too readily with such a recent and divisive event.

Therefore, despite the general tendency of anti-Jacobins to subordinate any analysis of 1798 to the greater imperative of combating the revolutionary threat to Britain, and the tendency of prominent Irish writers to skirt around the topic, it is interesting and perhaps even surprising that the very first novel featuring the Rebellion is rooted very firmly in Ireland and specifically Irish issues, notwithstanding the fact that it was first published in Southampton in 1799 (it was later republished in Dublin in 1801). Published anonymously, *The Rebel: A Tale of the Times*, concentrates on the experiences of the loyal Hamilton family in Wicklow and in Wales, to where some of the family flee for refuge, and combines elements of the anti-Jacobin and the Gothic. The plot of *The Rebel* centres on the notion of forgiveness, in that almost every major character has committed, or is suspected of having committed, some personal wrong in their private life, and the central plotline concerns a young man who was forced into becoming a rebel against his will by the man he believed to be his father. In fact, one of the most significant things about *The Rebel* is that while private and personal wrongs are ultimately forgiven, political ones are not. The one exception to this rule is the eponymous rebel himself, who proves that he is a loyalist in his heart by saving the life of George Hamilton, and in reuniting Mr Hamilton with his estranged wife. The underlying paranoia demonstrated in *The Rebel* can be explained by the novel's immediacy to the Rebellion itself. At one stage Hamilton reminds us in an ominous tone that while the country 'at present appears tolerably quiet ... the leaves wear a russet hue, and I dread the approaching winter'.<sup>20</sup> It was very much a tale of its time.

One conclusion that we can draw from a study of these early novels is that the anti-Jacobin novel survives as a suitable form for fiction about Ireland long after its

decline in English writing. Anti-Jacobin fiction had its publishing peak in Britain in 1798, and had largely disappeared as a form after the Treaty of Amiens in 1803 brought about a short-lived peace with Napoleonic France. In Ireland, perhaps because of 1798, the anti-Jacobin form endured. A five-volume anti-Jacobin novel centred on the Rebellion, *The Soldier of Pennaflor*, was published in Cork as late as 1810. It portrays the Rebellion not as a reaction to rights denied, but as an attempt to subvert the rights enjoyed by others. The answer to social ills in *Pennaflor* is not revolution and the redistribution of wealth and power, but personal virtue and discreet private charity. Only two rebels feature to any degree in the novel: one is an inarticulate and melodramatically demonic representation of rebellion, and the other, to the horror of the officers involved in the capture, turns out to be a woman who vents what for them is shockingly revolutionary rhetoric before taking her own life in front of them. For anti-Jacobin writers, it was impossible that good could come from evil. In *Pennaflor* and other anti-Jacobin novels, portraying the Rebellion – and the rebels – as intrinsically evil also removed any responsibility to provide a historical context for the Rebellion itself.

The middle years of the first decade, however, saw a number of novels that attempted, at least, to move beyond reaction. An interesting comparison to the paranoia of *The Rebel*, and to its reluctance to countenance any forgiveness for political error, is Elizabeth Plunkett (*née* Gunning)'s *The Exile of Erin* (1808), where the plot contained a plea for the forgiveness and repatriation of those more idealistic revolutionaries now exiled in the United States. The title manages to be both intertextual and allegorical. In the first place, it shares a title with a well-known poem by the Scottish poet Thomas Campbell, which broadly treats of the same theme. The overall theme is paralleled in the

subplot of the novel, in which a former rebel rescues a respectable noblewoman and her daughter from an abusive husband and flees with them to America. This subplot serves the purpose of putting the dilemma for Irish revolutionaries in domestic terms, presumably with an eye to a predominantly female readership. This former rebel, a Mr Fitzgerald – a significant name in the circumstances – justifies rescuing the woman from her husband (who was also his master) by claiming ‘When a degenerate world stands by and beholds every day with indifference their privileges trampled upon, and make sport of the miseries of unfortunate women, who have been driven over the brink of perdition by the cruelty of those who ought to be their protectors, shall no man dare to take their part? Who is so insensible as to be moderate when reprobating a conduct so infamous and contemptible?’<sup>21</sup>

However, the allegorical nature of *The Exile of Erin* also cannot be missed. The daughter in question is called ‘Erin’, thereby giving a double meaning to the novel’s title, and in the literal sense privileging the domestic subplot over the political one. In another allegorical flourish the central family in the story, although Catholics – itself interesting and unique in 1798 fiction of the first decade of the 1800s – are called Portland, the family name of the prime minister at the time of publication, and who had also served as Irish secretary during the Rebellion. Plunkett draws attention to this fact in a ‘Dedication to the Public’ written in the third person which ostensibly denies that there is any political purpose to the novel (‘As a woman she has avoided any thing like political discussion, well aware how ill one of her sex must be qualified to enter on such a topic’), but which of course merely alerts the reader to its obvious political message before cryptically stating, presumably in relation to the Portland reference, ‘All she has to

add is that it is the man and not the politician that is here delineated' (*EE*, i, p.vii). The Portlands are seen to be the victims of rumour, innuendo and summary injustice after the patriarch of the family, Henry Portland, rashly expresses liberal sentiments in the wrong company: '...had he been professedly of any religion besides the catholic faith, [these sentiments] would have been passed over in silence; but he unfortunately became an object of suspicion, and this suspicion, which fell on thousands as well as him, must be attributed to that bane of society the odious prejudice of religious bigotry, too generally inculcated in this unfortunate country with the first dawn of reason...' (*EE*, i, p.171).

But perhaps the most powerful effect of *The Exile of Erin* lay in the immediate prospect of a reversal of fortune. At the novel's end Rosanna Portland, Henry's daughter, has secured a pardon for her father and is to marry a nobleman who in turn is about to become the next lord lieutenant of Ireland. Rosanna resolves that once she is in her new position of power she will treat everyone, including the former oppressors of her family, with equal favour and goodwill. Such a move can be seen as both conciliatory and subversive, in that it is a wish for reconciliation coupled with the elevation of a Catholic woman to perhaps the highest social position in the country. In a wider generic sense it reinforces the national marriage motif associated with the national tale form, with Catholic Ireland again in the feminine role. If Plunkett is taking her cue from Sydney Owenson's archetypal national tale, then it is telling that Rosanna describes herself at the end of the novel as a 'little simple wild Irish girl' (*EE*, iii, p.54).

Perhaps the most interesting 1798 novels published in this entire period, however, are Edward Mangin's *Oddities and Outlines* (1806) and John Bernard Trotter's *Stories for Calumniators* (1809). Both of these rather eccentric texts evince a deep

suspicion of history and the motives of historians. A clergyman, Mangin had been a witness to the French surrender at the final battle of 1798 at Ballinamuck, and his novel is written in epistolary form, with each letter divided into two parts. One part recounts the travels of a man in French-occupied Europe, while the other part is the story of another man, Charles Beaver, whom his fictional correspondent meets during these travels, and who recounts to him his experiences in Ireland during the 1798 Rebellion. Mangin apologises in a foreword for the fact that there is ‘an unavoidable want of connexion between the first and latter parts of each letter’,<sup>22</sup> although of course in reality this merely alerts the reader to the implicit comparison to be made between the experiences of the people in French-occupied Europe and those in Ireland. *Oddities and Outlines* is an extended meditation on the necessity and/or the desirability of violent change, and the fact that the writer concludes that on the whole the majority of people in France are better off under Napoleonic despotism than they were under the *ancien régime*, is telling. Ireland is portrayed as no country for a liberal, enlightened man, as, in a foreshadowing of what would happen to the erstwhile Lord Glenthorn in Maria Edgeworth’s *Ennui*, the assumption is made that unless one was actively on the loyalist side one was a rebel. In *Oddities*, Charles Mason, a liberal gentleman, finds that his reluctance to get involved in what he sees as a civil war has exposed him to more danger from loyalist sources than from rebel ones. He does not fear the rebels or the neighbouring peasantry, ‘but cannot tell the hour when the troops of government may come hither in search of arms or fugitives; and my death or imprisonment will probably be the consequence, having long been a suspected person’ (*OO*, ii, p.42). In the end Mason is forced to leave Ireland, and, although acquitted of any suspicion of wrongdoing, he cannot bring himself to return.

However, the main characteristic of *Oddities* is its persistent ambiguity. It remains unclear whether the novel is an extended satire on the petty moralising of the educated classes or an earnest attempt to tease out and put into some kind of historical and social context the upheavals of the revolutionary era. In either event, Mangin's text is the first important novel about 1798 in that it does not provide any easy or simplistic answers to the issues it raises.

John Bernard Trotter's *Stories for Calumniators* is another attempt to avoid the perils of history, and it is the first novel of the Rebellion that endeavours to put the events of 1798 into a specifically Irish historical context. Featuring the story of an old man whose son had been arbitrarily executed during the Rebellion, and the traumatic experiences of two sisters whose clergyman father was executed for sheltering a rebel, the key element in the novel is the effect that these stories have on the evocatively-named Edward Fitzmaurice, the central character, who undergoes a form of historical awakening prompted by the old man's history lessons. The effect of this awakening is to see the Irish nation – and by extension Irishness – as being the product of what Joep Leerssen has termed the traumatic paradigm of history.<sup>23</sup> *Calumniators* transforms the Catholics of Ireland from the traditional aggressors of 1641 in Protestant and conservative history into the perpetual victims of betrayal and calumny, and the novel defines Ireland less in terms of the haves and more in terms of the have-nots. In a challenge to the Protestant view of what constituted the Irish Nation, the 'true' Irish nation is presented here as a fusing together of those who have been the victims of injustice and those who recognize and sympathize with the inequity of the Irish historical experience. Essentially, in *Stories for Calumniators*, the cause of the Catholics is the cause of Ireland. The blame for the

Rebellion is laid entirely at the hands of government, and all of the atrocities recounted are committed by state or loyalist forces. Trotter, who was at one time private secretary to Charles James Fox, and who wrote a controversial biography of him, demands rather than requests Catholic emancipation and social justice. In a preface to *Calumniators* Trotter writes that ‘There is now, therefore due to the catholics a full participation of civil rights as a compensation for the past and a security for the future.’<sup>24</sup> There is no sense here that what is being looked for is a concession: on the contrary, it is a demand.

Although neither *Oddities and Outlines* nor *Stories for Calumniators* are historical novels in the sense that we would understand the term in the wake of Walter Scott, both of these novels do attempt to put the Rebellion into an historical context. In a somewhat surreal episode in *Oddities and Outlines* the young hero of the Irish component of the story, Charles Beaver, comes into possession of a ring which one night, in what we may presume to be a dream, begins to speak and to give an account of his experiences since the time of Oliver Cromwell. Displaying two attitudes that were certainly pertinent to developments in Ireland, the ring strongly disapproved of Cromwell and also, in what seems certain to be a comment in relation to the 1790s, ‘the calamitous effects of civil war, the contention of parties inflamed by religious and political prejudices, and the various ills arising to a nation from an unsettled or an arbitrary government’ (*OO*, i, p.38). The ring confirms the view held by Beaver that ‘history records more bad actions than good ones, and more lies than truth’ (*OO*, i, p.27). The ring’s final words, based on its two centuries of existence, were ‘how much greater was the proportion of vice and folly, in this planet, than that of virtue and wisdom’ (*OO*, i, p.48). *Oddities and Outlines* is essentially misanthropic; it argues that ideas are not good or bad in themselves, but that



it is the actions of humanity that cause misery and turmoil in the world. As a result, it is not history *per se* that is attacked but historians, as they ‘perpetually mislead ... in assigning effects to non-existing causes, and in mistaking the motives of human conduct; whereby they utterly defeat the great end and object of historical relations’ (*OO*, i, p.32).

*Stories for Calumniators* also gropes towards the historical, this time by highlighting historical grievances. Trotter states that ‘History itself must be disagreeable if it treat of recent matter; but truth is the origin of all good, whether in a private or public sphere, and the good of the community is best promoted by its elucidation’ (*SC*, i, p.[v]). *Calumniators* features a character called ‘the old woman of Clough-Skilt’, who gives an account of her own experiences of the traumas of Irish history. Here, Trotter addresses the historical in a direct way, by including a living history book in the form of the old woman. From the information given it appears that she was born in 1690, the year of the Battle of the Boyne, and the year before the fateful treaty of Limerick. This would mean that she lived through what would have been the crucial period in Trotter’s historical analysis of the problems of Ireland. Trotter’s distrust of historians is once more apparent in the observation of Fitzmaurice that that he had imagined the old woman as ‘a monument of antient days, more valuable than history, in so much as she could answer the interrogatory of the moment, and search in the storehouse of memory for facts, and opinions relating to our ancestors’ (*SC*, ii, pp.186-7). Another character states that the woman ‘has not the motive of many historians to colour her statements. She is no politician or partizan, but narrates simply and conformably to what happened’ (*SC*, ii, p.187). However naïve this view of history might be, like Mangin’s talking ring, the old woman is an attempt to get behind history, and at the ‘truth’. In presenting a character

who has lived through the contentious issues of Ireland's eighteenth century, Trotter is endeavouring to escape the essential textuality of history. Rather than simply attempting to rewrite history, Trotter presents something more tangible: a living testament to the past. In doing so he re-emphasises his scepticism about the value and purpose of historical narrative.

The talking ring and the old woman are attempts to get beyond the limitations and prejudices of the historian. In both cases their longevity allows them to relate events and impressions first-hand, beyond the period of a normal lifetime, but of which they have had personal experience. Thus they have both the first-hand experience *and* the benefit of historical perspective. They are both participants and interpreters. That these devices were considered necessary says something about the unease felt by Mangin and Trotter about history and historical discourse. However, we must be cautious in drawing the conclusion that this is evidence that these novels are proto-historical. These attempts to bypass written history may in fact be an expression of a deep distrust of *any* attempts to portray history, not only in fiction, but in written form. The only thing we can say for certain is that they show evidence of an historical consciousness. The juxtaposition in *Oddities and Outlines* of tales from the French Revolution and post-Revolutionary France with a story set during the 1798 Rebellion cannot but help to invite comparisons and to encourage readers to see one in the light of the other. This is, at the very least, an attempt to see 1798 in *an* historical context, albeit a recent one.

While Trotter's *Stories for Calumniators* is undoubtedly assertive on behalf of Catholics, it was only in the second decade of the century that we can trace the beginnings of an assertive Catholic voice in fiction in the shape of two novels – Eliza

Kelly's *The Matron of Erin: A National Tale* (1816), and the anonymous *The United Irishman, Or, the Fatal Effects of Credulity* (1819). Although we know very little about her, Kelly's *Matron of Erin* is the first novel about the Rebellion that we know to be definitely written by a Catholic, and it brings together anti-Jacobin, Enlightenment, and Romantic ideas in a broadly conservative and didactic work that both utilizes and challenges the existing conventions of the national tale. Its title and content directly challenges the infantilizing of Irish womanhood and the exoticizing of Catholicism seen in Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl*. In what may be a further direct challenge to the vision of Catholic Ireland presented in *The Wild Irish Girl*, Kelly's novel is also centred round a Catholic family in Connaught. The 'matron' of the title, Paulina Westmond, is the daughter of a Catholic baronet who marries the Protestant Charles Delwyn; whose frustrated political ambition and atheistical education propels him into a leadership role with the United Irishmen. Delwyn incites the naturally conservative Catholic population of the area into taking part in the 1798 Rebellion by murdering Paulina's father, with predictably disastrous results for both himself and the locals. Delwyn is eventually fatally wounded by a man whose family was destroyed by the Rebellion, but he dies reconciled to his family and to God. In its espousal of upper-class Catholicism and its values, *The Matron of Erin* actually seeks to remove the religious element from the political equation. The potential that existed for social and political upheaval is seen to have less to do with religious differences and much more to do with inappropriate education, abuses in the administration and the spread of ideas that did not have their root in any religion. In doing so, *The Matron of Erin* endeavours to prepare the way for Catholic emancipation by portraying any such move as not only just but sensible

and in the interests of the ruling class. It also attempts to undermine any attempt to see Catholics as a monolithic block. It suggests the existence of a coalition of interest that transcends perceived barriers and reflects not only a more complex society, and a more complicated social structure than hitherto portrayed in 1798 novels.

Although it cannot be said with certainty that the anonymous author of *The United Irishman* was a Catholic, the writer is intensely sympathetic towards Catholicism, and it is interesting that *The United Irishman* succeeds in showing two different views in parallel: that of the Catholics involved in the Rebellion and that of the loyal establishment who resisted it, without passing judgment on either. Thus the loyal soldiery in *The United Irishman* are seen in a good light and all the aristocrats featured in the novel are virtuous. The rebel brothers at the heart of the tale remain, so far as we can tell, unrepentant about their involvement in the Rebellion, although they need the intervention of aristocratic and loyalist friends to secure their pardons. The real odium in *The United Irishman* is reserved for men such as James Mackle, the novel's version of Jason Quirk, who abuse laws and circumstances for their own benefit and to the detriment of others. These people, inevitably, come from outside the existing governing classes. *The United Irishman* is therefore a vindication of the landowning classes and expressive, like *The Matron of Erin*, of the view that landowning Catholics and Protestants have far more in common with one another than they have to divide them, and that the abuse of unfair laws is a threat not only to Catholics but to the entire structure of society. Although the novel begins, in true national tale form, with a series of letters written by an Englishman, Augustus Tranton, the final letter in the novel is written by Gerald O'Brien, the United Irishman of the title, and the roles of Tranton and O'Brien are reversed. Not only does

Gerald O'Brien finally take direct narrative control over the story, changing it into a tale about Tranton narrated by O'Brien rather than a tale about O'Brien narrated by Tranton, but the perspective and the outcome of this story is exactly the opposite to that of the first 1798 novel, *The Rebel*, even if the moral of the tale is largely the same. In *The United Irishman* the surviving rebels are either pardoned or never prosecuted. It is Tranton, whom we discover is guilty of a civil or moral, rather than a political, wrong, who is punished, in that he ultimately loses his reason. Political errors – if that is what they were – are not ultimately punished. The contrast with *The Rebel*, where rebellion is intrinsically evil and personal and private wrongs are forgiven but political ones are not, could not be stronger.

The last novel to be considered in this survey is also the most difficult to categorize or relate to the others featured here, in that it owes its form and content to a very different literary and political context. It is perhaps not surprising that the most outspoken, unapologetic and unambiguously admiring early fictional text praising the United Irishmen was published in the United States. *The Irish Emigrant*, published in Virginia in 1817, is also recognised as the first Irish-American novel.<sup>25</sup> It has been credited to one Adam Douglass, about whom nothing certain is known, although a man of that name, born c.1790 in Belfast, did emigrate to Maryland in 1813, and subsequently settled not far from Winchester, Virginia, where the novel was published.<sup>26</sup> In many ways, *The Irish Emigrant* is a one-off in terms of the way it portrays the 1798 Rebellion in this period. The writer is an unapologetic admirer of the United Irishmen and their principles, and the novel's militant republicanism points to a version of 1798 created in the image of the American Revolution. It also creates a template for future Irish-

American fiction, in that it is both proudly and patriotically Irish *and* American. The principal characters recognise the United States as the greatest country in the world, albeit with one great vice – its continued toleration of slavery – but they remain proudly Irish, even though they intend to make their life in the New World. *The Irish Emigrant* can be seen as a late intervention into a debate about the accommodation and toleration of former United Irish figures in American society.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, the principal character of *The Irish Emigrant*, who led the northern rebels in the novel's version of the Rebellion, is a Catholic. Whether this is an attempt to reflect a perception that the Rebellion was a Catholic one, or alternatively, that the United Irishmen were a genuinely multi-denominational organisation, is a matter of conjecture. The writer was almost certainly not Catholic, and, given the general tenor of the novel, it seems most likely that associating Catholics with republican and democratic principles, and demonstrating that they too could become patriotic American citizens, were central concerns. *The Irish Emigrant* is a remarkable text for many reasons, and while on one level it can be seen to exist in transatlantic isolation from the other texts considered here, it is also a reminder of the importance of the 1798 theme in early Irish – and Irish-American – fiction. Taken in tandem with Elizabeth Plunkett's *The Exile of Erin*, we can see the beginning of a transatlantic element in 1798 fiction that provides a different context to consider 1798 and, ultimately, a different readership for 1798 fiction.

What we find then, in this reading of the novels written in the two decades following after 1798, is the beginnings of a debate about the Rebellion, and about how to represent those who participated in it, especially those on the rebel side. The points of view range from the utterly hostile, as in early novels such as *The Rebel* and *The Infernal*

*Quixote*, through a more thoughtful period, represented by *The Exile of Erin*, *Oddities and Outlines* and *Stories for Calumniators*, to a more assertive Catholic viewpoint as seen in *The Matron of Erin* and *The United Irishman*, and finally to a valorization of the United Irishmen and their principles that was largely the property of Irish-American fiction until it began to appear in domestic fiction in the 1860s. Kevin Whelan has observed that the 1798 Rebellion was fought twice: once on the field, and afterwards in the propaganda war that followed in the decades after the Rebellion.<sup>28</sup> These texts are both influenced by, and contributions to, that propaganda war.

This survey of early 1798 fiction reveals that there is no evidence at this stage of the sort of historical scene-setting that came into vogue with the advent of Scott's *Waverley* in 1814. The link between the Volunteers of the 1770s and 1780s and the United Irishmen, so common in the Scott-influenced novels of the 1820s, is not yet evident. Similarly, there is no attempt to introduce any real historical personages into narratives, with the brief and superficial exception of General Lake in *The Soldier of Pennaflor*. Populated entirely by characters created by the various authors, and operating on a timescale and in a landscape very much designed to suit the author's own didactic, moral, political, philosophical, or romantic purposes, the Rebellion is seen less as an event with a basic historical integrity and more as a moment of crisis. Although the authors of this period seldom stray beyond its parameters, that does not mean that they felt in any way constrained by historical reality, as future, more historically conscious, novelists undoubtedly did.

This is not to say that there were no attempts to put the Rebellion into an historical context. As we have seen, the talking ring in *Oddities and Outlines* and the old

woman of Clough-Skilt in *Stories for Calumniators* are attempts to get beyond the limitations and prejudices of the historian. However, we must be cautious in drawing the conclusion that this is evidence that these novels are proto-historical – these attempts to bypass written history may in fact be an expression of a deep distrust of *any* attempts to portray history, not only in fiction, but in written form. The only thing we can say for certain is that they show evidence of an historical consciousness. The juxtaposition in *Oddities and Outlines* of tales of the French Revolution and post-Revolutionary France with a story set during the 1798 Rebellion cannot but help to invite comparisons and to encourage readers to see one in the light of the other. This is, at the very least, an attempt to see 1798 in *an* historical context, albeit one that was for the writer in question a recent one.

Some of the novels, in particular *Oddities and Outlines* and *Stories for Calumniators*, explore the underlying political and philosophical questions at the heart of Rebellion, albeit in very different ways. Taken as a whole, the early fictions do provide a comprehensive, if not all-encompassing, critique of 1798. For example, while *Oddities and Outlines* explores the necessity and morality of violent revolutionary change in general terms, *Stories for Calumniators* concentrates almost exclusively on state violence. In their treatment of 1798, later novels such as *The Matron of Erin* and *The United Irishman* give an insight into the landed Catholic perspective; a perspective that highlights the complexity of the totality of relationships within Ireland. In a time when Irish identity and politics had yet to fully break down on a sectarian basis, these novels allow and facilitate parallel interpretations of the situation and do not try to reconcile them. This parallelism however presents problems for the more historically conscious



novelists of the 1820s – the disciples of Walter Scott – and beyond. When they tried to put the 1798 Rebellion into the kind of resolved historical context demanded by the Scottish historical novel model the differences in these interpretations became something that could not be ignored. As the nineteenth century progressed, a new historical orthodoxy, largely sustained by Catholic nationalism and fed by hagiographical biographies of individual United Irishmen and other rebel leaders, meant that the dominant grand narrative of 1798 came to reflect Catholic and nationalist perceptions. Broadly unionist and conservative fiction writers who engaged with the 1798 Rebellion tended to retreat from grand narratives towards more obviously subjective tales of individual experience and trauma. Although 1798 remained an enormously popular topic with historical novelists up to and beyond the centenary of the Rebellion in 1898, and it continued to inspire innovative approaches, it is in the two decades following the Rebellion that we see the greatest variety and the most innovative uses of 1798. This was undoubtedly because the writers were not dealing with resolved and distant history but a recent trauma, and as such these fictions were truly ‘tales of the time’.

## **NOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> Colm Tóibín, *The Heather Blazing* (London: Picador, 1992); *The Mighty Wave: the 1798 Rebellion in Wexford*, ed. by Daire Keogh and Nicholas Furlong (Dublin: Four Courts, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> The ballad upon which ‘Boolavogue’ was based was entitled ‘Come All You Warriors’ or ‘Father Murphy’, and was in circulation within a few years of the Rebellion; see G.D. Zimmerman, *Songs of Irish Rebellion: Political Street Ballads and Rebel Songs 1780-1900* (Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1967), pp.142-3; *The Age of Revolution: 1776 to 1815 in the Irish Song Tradition*, ed. by Terry Moylan (Dublin: Lilliput, 2000), pp.50-1.

<sup>3</sup> John Kells Ingram, ‘The Memory of the Dead’, initially published in the *Nation* on 1 April 1843 and included in *The Spirit of the Nation* later that year; see Moylan, pp.102-3.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Nora, ‘Preface to the English Language Edition: From Lieux de Mémoire to Realms of Memory’, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, ed. by Pierre Nora, 3 vols, English-language edn ed. and with a Foreword by Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), i, p.xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Ferris claims that it was only in the late 1820s that a series of novels ‘foregrounding the question’ of the 1798 Rebellion appeared, stating that it had ‘remained for the most part a troubling undercurrent in the first two decades (with the arguable exception of Maturin’s *Milesian Chief*) appearing as narrative episode or interpolation or showing up in paratextual space like footnotes.’; see Ina Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.135.

<sup>6</sup> The eleven novels so far identified and which feature in this article are as follows: ‘A Lady’, *The Rebel: A Tale of the Times* (1799; repr. Dublin: P. Wogan, W. Porter, J. Rice, J. Halpen, H. Colbert, B. Dornin, G. Folingsby, and J. Stockdale, 1801); Charles Lucas,

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*The Infernal Quixote: A Tale of the Day*, 4 vols (London: William Lane, 1801); [Mrs Bullock], *Dorothea; Or, A Ray of the New Light*, 3 vols (London: G.G. & J. Robinson, 1801); 'E.M.' [Edward Mangin], *Oddities and Outlines*, 2 vols (London: J. Carpenter, 1806); Mrs [Elizabeth] Plunkett, *The Exile of Erin, A Novel*, 3 vols (London: B. Crosby, 1808); J. B. Trotter, *Stories for Calumniators: Interspersed with Remarks on the Disadvantages, Misfortunes, and Habits of the Irish*, 2 vols (Dublin: H. Fitzpatrick, 1809); Maria Edgeworth, 'Ennui', in *Tales of Fashionable Life*, 3 vols (London: J. Johnson, 1809); 'A Lady', *The Soldier of Pennaflor: Or, A Season in Ireland. A Tale of the Eighteenth Century*, 5 vols (Cork: J. Connor, 1810); Mrs [Eliza] Kelly, *The Matron of Erin: A National Tale*, 3 vols (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1816); 'An Hibernian' [Adam Douglass?], *The Irish Emigrant. An Historical Tale Founded On Fact*, 2 vols (Winchester VA: John T. Sharrocks, 1817); Anon., *The United Irishman, Or the Fatal Effects of Credulity; A Tale Founded on Facts*, 2 vols (Dublin: printed for the author, 1819). This list does not include those works by Edgeworth, Owenson, Maturin, Lamb and Bisset that also feature in this article but are not considered '1798' novels.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed assessment of the influence of Walter Scott on Irish fiction see Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: the Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997) *passim*, and James M. Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room: the Irish Historical Novel* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1983), *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> See in particular, *A Guide to Irish Fiction 1650-1900*, ed. by Rolf and Magda Loeber (Dublin: Four Courts, 2006); *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction in the British Isles*, 2 vols, ed. by Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Schöwerling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Jacqueline Belanger, 'Preliminary

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[http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc04\\_n02.html](http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc04_n02.html). (accessed 10/02/2008).

<sup>9</sup> Tom Dunne, 'Representations of 1798 in Literature', in *Ireland, England and Australia: Essays in Honour of Oliver MacDonagh*, ed. by F.B. Smith (Cork: Cork University Press, 1990), p.28. Dunne concentrates on Maria Edgeworth, Charles Maturin, Sydney Owenson, Thomas Moore and John Banim.

<sup>10</sup> See note 8 above.

<sup>11</sup> Lady Morgan [Sydney Owenson], *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys. A National Tale*, 4 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1827), i, p.vii.

<sup>12</sup> For a reading of *Castle Rackrent* in a 1798 context, see Kathryn Kirkpatrick, 'Putting Down the Rebellion: Notes and Glosses on *Castle Rackrent*, 1800', *Éire-Ireland*, 30:1 (1995), 77-90.

<sup>13</sup> See 'The Milesian Chief', in *Critical Review*, Fourth Series, I (1812), 396; Trumpener, p.9.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Robert Maturin, *The Milesian Chief. A Romance*, 4 vols (London; Henry Colburn, 1812), iii, pp.34-5. Further page references will be included parenthetically in the text.

<sup>15</sup> See W. M. Verhoeven, 'General Introduction', in *Anti-Jacobin Novels*, ed. by W.M. Verhoeven, 10 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), i, p.xiv.

<sup>16</sup> M.O. Grenby, 'Introduction', in Charles Lucas, *The Infernal Quixote: A Tale of the Day*, ed. by M.O. Grenby (Ontario: Broadview, 2004), pp.26-7.

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<sup>17</sup> The northern rebel's name was 'Magennis'; see Thomas Bartlett, Kevin Dawson and Dáire Keogh, *The 1798 Rebellion: An Illustrated History* (Boulder CO: Roberts Rinehart, 1998), p.186.

<sup>18</sup> Lady Maria Nugent, *Lady Nugent's Journal of her Residence in Jamaica from 1801 to 1805*, ed. by Philip Wright, with a foreword by Verene A. Shepherd (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), p.46; Clara Mary Jane Clairmont, *The Journals of Claire Clairmont*, ed. by Marion Kingston Stocking (Cambridge MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1968), p.49.

<sup>19</sup> M.O. Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.117.

<sup>20</sup> *The Rebel*, p. 111.

<sup>21</sup> Plunkett, ii, pp.135-6. Further page references will be included parenthetically in the text.

<sup>22</sup> [Mangin], i, p.xii. Further page references will be included parenthetically in the text.

<sup>23</sup> Joep Leerssen, '1798: The Recurrence of Violence and Two Conceptualisations of History', *Irish Review*, 22 (1998), 37-45.

<sup>24</sup> Trotter, i, p. [x]. Further page references will be included parenthetically in the text.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Fanning, *The Irish Voice in America: 250 Years of Irish-American Fiction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Lexington KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), p.39.

<sup>26</sup> See [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org), (accessed 09/08/2007); Kenneth Scott, *British Aliens in the United States during the War of 1812* (Baltimore MD: Genealogical Publishing, 1979), p.299.

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<sup>27</sup> For a history of attitudes towards United Irish figures in the United States and their influence on American society and politics, see David A. Wilson, *United Irishmen, United States: Immigrant Radicals in the Early Republic* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> Kevin Whelan, ‘’98 After ’98: The Politics of Memory’, in Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty: Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of Irish Identity 1760-1830* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), p.133.